

Today Rep. Pete Stark and several additional members of Congress introduced the Medicare Mental Health Modernization Act, with companion legislation introduced in the Senate by Senator Paul Wellstone. This comprehensive bill establishes parity for mental and physical illnesses in Medicare and expands beneficiary access to community-based mental health services and qualified mental health professionals.

“Policymakers on both sides of the aisle agree that Medicare’s mental health benefits are woefully inadequate and out-of-date, yet none of the current Medicare reform proposals specifically address mental health,” said Rep. Stark. “It is time to stop stigmatizing mental illness and restricting access to mental health services that can improve the health and well-being of our nation’s elderly and disabled. Mental health modernization must be part of any fundamental Medicare reform.”

The Medicare Mental Health Modernization Act modernizes Medicare in three important areas. First, it establishes equal coverage for mental and physical illness. It eliminates the 190 day lifetime cap on inpatient services in psychiatric hospitals and reduces the 50% co-pay for outpatient mental health services to the 20% level enjoyed by most other Part B medical services. Second, the bill expands beneficiary access to a range of community-based residential and outpatient services that appropriately reflect state-of-the-art mental health treatment. Finally, the bill addresses the growing shortage of qualified mental health professionals serving older Americans by allowing state licensed marriage and family therapists and mental health counselors to provide Medicare-covered services.

“We urgently need to bring the Medicare system into the 21st century,” Wellstone said. “Mental health problems among the elderly are widespread and life-threatening. Americans aged 65 years and older have the highest suicide rate of any population in the United States – and yet, in order to receive mental health care, seniors must pay, out of their own pockets, one-half the cost of a visit to their mental health specialist. That is an extremely unfair burden to place on the elderly, who so often have other health problems as well. The time to make this change is now.”

This bill is strongly supported by a range of mental health organizations representing consumers, family members, and professionals. These include the American Association of Geriatric Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, National Mental Health Association and many others.

Michael Faenza, President and CEO of the National Mental Health Association, offered

strong support for the Medicare Mental Health Modernization Act, “Your legislation would help give Medicare beneficiaries access to mental health services that are now foreclosed under the program, while eliminating fiscal barriers which have no place in sound policy or program administration.”

Rep. Stark concluded: “This bill is an important step forward in providing mental health coverage for senior citizens and people with disabilities. It ends Medicare’s longstanding discriminatory mental health benefits and expands access to people who need mental health care. With the passage of this bill, we seek to ensure that the mental health needs of elderly and disabled Americans are fully addressed.”